THE PAINT CREW

WANTED
2 experienced house painters.
Immediately.
Call Women's Brush and Roll Company.
679-2407. Ask for Delia.

Before going back to Argentina, Mari needs money for her airplane ticket and for presents—she wants to be home at Christmas season for the first time in five years. I need extra money to supplement my meager unemployment check. So, we jump at this ad in *Women News*.

I have some painting experience from fixing up many of my studios. But Mari has never done this kind of work before. So when Delia, the person in charge, repeats over the phone that she wants only experienced painters I decide to lie. Mari's options for jobs are limited; she doesn't have a work permit. I tell Delia that I am great on detail work and Mari is good with a roller. I think anyone who can maneuver her way around the world surely can learn how to roll on paint.

For practice, we paint a wall in the studio. I show her how to scrape, plaster, use a brush as well as a roller. She does great work but no amount of urging on my part helps increase her speed to my expectations. She knows her pace and that is that. Maybe they can give an Argentine house painter some leeway, we laughed. She can simply say that in her country she is fast.

The worst thing that can happen is that we will be fired.

The day begins well. Mari is placed on window duty, told to be accurate rather than quick and I am on woodwork. Delia and Ginny, the only others who report that day, woman the rollers.

Mari's acting is superb. Everyone assumes she has done this work before. Mainly she doesn't ask any silly questions. She is clever at adapting to new situations. I soon relax and begin to enjoy the rhythm of dipping the brush into thick paint and applying it.

Delia, the crew's leader, a striking, lanky woman with straight, black hair and piercing blue eyes, seems all arms and legs, not because of awkwardness but because her limbs are so long. She herself is a singer and tells us that the paint fumes are ruining her throat, but this is the only work she can find to do that is at all tolerable.

"Office work makes me go bananas," she says, then climbs up a well-used ladder and starts to roll paint on energetically.

Mari is framed by the window she paints. The light coming through her brown hair gives her a haloed look. I feel a quiet joy that we have been able to find work together that's almost fun. I'm curious if she feels the same thing. The atmosphere is filled with the swishes of paint brushes and clicks of roller wheels running on walls.

"Is like the breathing of Pachamma holding onto the illusion of existence."

"Come again, Mari? Pachamma?" Ginny, a quiet, small woman from Long Island is painting the wall next to the windows.

"She is the Incan Mother Earth. We have so many myths about the creation. How all existence came to be. Painting this room makes me think them."

Delia is straining from her ladder perch to get a good look at the area I'm painting, woodwork around a large archway.

"Is this okay, Delia? Am I supposed to cover the woodwork with just one coat?"

"Philip—he's the owner—said, 'Put the paint on thick because I'm only going to have one layer of paint put on the rooms.' So do the best you can. Lay it on. That looks pretty good, Judith.

Just keep the brush strokes going in the same direction though."

"Are we going to meet this Philip person?" Ginny asks. I notice that she is wearing rubber gloves.

Delia doesn't answer her.

Mari has left her windows and is dipping her brush in Ginny's tray of paint.

"Wouldn't it be easier to have your own paint can?" Ginny asks.

"No one gave me." Mari grins.

"Around here you have to fend for yourself. Delia, didn't you set up, Mari? She needs a paint can."

"It's easier for you to do it now, Ginny. I don't want to climb up and down this ladder any more than I have to. It's not the greatest. Could you get that empty coffee can by the door and give her some, please? Thanks."

"Some people aren't very organized are they, Judith?" Ginny says sardonically but does as Delia requests.

I wonder what's going on between them.

"Mari, what were you saying about the breathing? That sounded interesting." Ginny is back at her wall.

Mari is still holding up her can of paint from Ginny as if she were holding a cup of tea. I hope they don't notice.

"Don't drink the paint, Mari," Ginny smiles. "You're so adorable. Are all Latino-American dykes like you?"

"Like what am I?" Mari asks, coming out of some far-away-place. She sets the can carefully on the floor by her work station.

"I don't know. I just met you," Ginny says.

"Come on, girls, let's keep working," Delia says.

I wonder why she doesn't use the long roller and stand on the floor. The ladder doesn't look all that safe.

"So what's one of your creation myths?" Delia asks after checking to see if Mari is back working again. "I hope it's better than the one about Eve coming out of Adam's rib."

"That's a Judeo-Christian fantasy, not a creation myth," Ginny says. "Those guys tried to pull the wool over our eyes from the very beginning. I want to know where everything came from.

Animals, rocks, trees, birds, all the stuff."

"Well, I can tell you a few of them and you'll get an idea about the complexity of my people, especially the Indians people," Mari says.

"We're all ears, honey," I say.

"Hokay, my Pretty. You want one about ears? We have a so beautiful Chaco myth about how the Timbo tree came in existence."

"Timbo?" Ginny asks. "We only have timber here."

"That's corny, Ginny," I say.

"Come on, Girls," Delia interrupts. "Stop showing your ignorance. Hey, what am I supposed to do about this?"

We give her our attention. The ceiling has concave areas that the roller doesn't cover.

"Looks like you have hills and valleys in your ceiling. That looks like a brush job," I say.

"Should I do it with my leetle brush?" Mari asks, rather coyly I think.

"No. I might not seem organized but I do have proper size brushes for ceilings. I hope I can handle this problem, girls. Sorry, women. Didn't mean to interrupt you, Mari."

"Don't make no apology, Delia," Mari says. "The work come first." She settles back into her window frame. "Seems all religions have some conception of a flood and then after that the so-called civilized civilizations come. Well, they have what you call matrilinial myth to show the womens' role in the creation. The Chacos say the deluge was caused by a menstruating girl and civilization and the arts come all after that."

"That's interesting," Delia says. "Remind me, somebody, that I have to touch up these valleys with a brush later. Okay?"

"That's okay," Ginny says.

"So is some kind of reality base," Mari continues. "Not all the true Indian myths were carried down because Christian chroniclers of the ancient stories change a lot the facts. But the old myth goes that this particular girl-woman makes to come all the life forms. And she keep the peace until the invaders come."

"The Spaniards?" Delia asks.

"Probablemente, but could be older invading tribes. They say she put herself at the head of the army and repel them. Her father was so worry for her. He put his ear to the ground and wait to hear her return. But she was so busy protesting the invaders she didn't come back. And he die that way, his ear pressed to the earth. So came the Timbo tree. It's our large and so beautiful tree. The crest is like an umbrella and it fruit is black berries shaped like ears."

"Ear berries," Delia chuckles. "That's so cute."

"It's unusual to honor menstruation," I say, feeling annoyed at how Delia and Ginny see Mari as cute. "Usually in primitive societies girls are put in huts and made to keep to themselves when they begin to menstruate. Maybe that's honoring by isolation, but it would make me feel unwanted."

"They really fucked us over in every way they could," Delia says.

"We have so many myths about the origins that you would love," Mari goes on. "For example, I feel right now I'm at the royal window."

"Just holler, queen, when you need more paint and I'll serve you," Ginny says.

Better *queen* than *cute*. I feel very protective of Mari.

Mari goes on to tell us that the *royal window* in an Inca myth was the middle window, lined with jewels and gold. In the beginning, this window was the entranceway for four brothers and four sisters to make their way into the world. These brothers and sisters became the creators of civilization, the teachers of philosophy and all the arts. She tells us what solidarity there was between brothers/and sisters in many of the Inca origin stories. She also says that huacas were made to keep the worship of these creative, life forces alive. She seems proud of me when I explain to everyone that huacas are sacred objects in nature which embody spiritual forces.

Delia reminds us all of their similarity to the Hopis' kachinas. "Kachinas are spiritual guides found in masks and dolls who return to help us continue our evolutionary journey," she says dramatically, making her way down her creaking ladder to solid

ground. She rubs her neck a bit then screws the handle of her roller onto a long stick. "All right, baby, do right by me," she says, lowering the roller into a tray of paint. "Don't you dare splatter any matter." She lifts the full roller to the ceiling with such marked concentration I half expect it to leap away from her.

"Don't forget those valleys, Delia," Ginny says. "Maybe you should change professions."

"From what to what?" Delia asks.

"From painter to mythologist. Mythologists come up with the darndest interpretations of reality. They make their ideas sound like facts."

"Gee, sorry I exist, Ginny. I'll keep my mouth shut," Delia says.

Obviously there are bad vibes between Delia and Ginny. They're using Mari and me as audience to act out their shit. They act like a grumpy married couple. How can they work together under tension like this?

"What I really want to know is—what is your hometown like?" Delia gives some fast rolls and then surveys the area covered. "How does that look, team," she says as if to herself.

I stop painting a second and look. The light orchid color now covering an antique white seems darker in tone in some areas.

"Delia, are you sure the paint was mixed up well?" I ask.

"Why?"

"The ceiling looks uneven. Over there by the light fixture, it's a deeper color than where you are. See what I mean?"

"Where is *there* and where is *here?*"

"Here, I'll show you." I point out the two areas.

"I see what you mean. I don't think they are different colors. I think I put the paint on thicker here then there to cover up the indentations in the ceiling. Let me see your wall, Ginny."

"Take a look, boss." Ginny drops the roller in the pan and wipes her hands on the white cloth hanging from her pocket. She stands solid on her feet, legs spaced apart.

"A or A plus?" she quips.

"It looks pretty good," Delia says sulkily and walks back to

her ladder. "Just everybody put the paint on as thick as you can. Well, back to the grindstone. I don't know what we'd do without Mari's stories to paint by. A story please, on your home town."

Mari seems oblivious of the tension in the room. She's infinitely amenable to Delia's requests. There must be chemistry between them.

"For me it is my mama, Griselda, who gave birth to me and my fantasy under the leaves of paradise tree with all her terrible and beautiful dreams of what I would be. She has a house surrounded by climbing vines and watermelons that are like little world creations all themselves. I imagine the womens in my town came down from the sky on the vines to feed the animals and to plant the flowers and gave birth to twelve girl apostles."

"God, Mari," Delia says. "Why can't a person get a straight description from you—like some facts? Ginny likes facts. Don't you, Ginny? How many people live in your town? What do the people do for a living?"

"It's a so small town, maybe your five thousand people with as many horses and cows around the town and as many fruit trees and vegetable gardens closer to the center. Most of the houses are white and the flowers are the more beautiful flowers of the world. My mama keep the crisantema, geranio, margarita in clay pots around her house. Seem like they are the manifestaciónes of her dream images."

"Could you translate, please. I adore flowers," Ginny says.

"Those are your chrysantemums, geranmums and dailies," Mari says.

"Chrysanthemums, geraniums and daisies," I say.

"And she also grow your fuchia and begonia and other flowers so strange and delicate that you don't to see in this country."

"It's amazing. No matter what Mari tells me about her home town, I imagine the most fantastic place in the world," I say placing my brush on the top of my paint can for a moment. I run over to her and place a wet kiss on her cheek. I see she has little bubbles of paint on her lips, washes of orchid on her hands and arms. "Not to worry, Mari," I whisper. "It's washable."

"Hey, none of that on company time, you guys," Delia says.

"I'm just taking a kissing break," I say. "Do you want me to just keep doing the woodwork? Or I could take a turn on that ladder if you want."

"Why don't you just keep doing that, Jude. Maybe we'll switch jobs tomorrow."

"Okay. I'm actually getting into this woodwork. You get such a sense of accomplishment with painting; it's all very clear what you've done and what you haven't done. The only problem I have with this work is the paint smell. It reminds me of my home town. Mari's sounds so gorgeous, all flowers and picket fences. I got an industrial town when they were dishing out home towns, an endless landscape of rectangle buildings, pipe lines, towers, and the most foul odor of chemicals. If you get past that you see the homes of the millionaires. The alchemists who have turned chemicals into mansions."

"Where do you come from, Judith?" Ginny asks.

"Centerville, Ohio."

"Oh, the Midwest. Tornado land."

"The land Dorothy and Toto had to get away from to find Oz. I had to get away from it too, to find myself."

"Hey, Jude, you're pretty poetic yourself." Delia says.

"I wish I'd felt like a poet when I was growing up there. But I felt like a misfit. Ms. Unfit. The arts were the playthings of the wealthy executives of the Burrough Plastic Company, not something you did for real. It was something you might do after a nine-to-five day or after making supper for your family. The idea of focusing on your imagination, on your intuition and feelings was seen as a luxury. No one talked about intelligence of the senses. About sensuality. That's what Mari shows me. Someone who's really magnified and developed the world of her own impressions."

"I see what you mean," Delia says. "She does have a gift. Hey, Argentinian, you're a whole Walt Disney movie, or better, a Fellini film."

"There you go being glib again, Delia," Ginny says. "I think everybody should stop talking so we can get some work done here."

"Well, maybe I don't have the gift of gab, Mari," Delia says, "but you do seem fantastic to me. Is that okay to say, Ginny?"

What's with Ginny. It's a bore to hear them go at each other. Delia definitely is struck by Mari. And Mari's in great form today. I've never heard her wax so poetic without interjecting some diatribe about the poverty of South America and the nastiness of my country.

"But, Mari, if you're all that attached to your hometown," Delia holds her roller suddenly mid-air and looks straight at Mari in a challenging way, "then how come you left it so long? Five years is no sabbatical. It's more like retirement." Her voice changes. "Gee, I don't know why I said that. It's just that whenever I go home I feel like E.T. Actually, I don't go home any more. I've been disowned." She seems not to notice the paint running down the roller handle onto her arm.

"Just become famous and they'll all come crawling to your door," I call up from a hands and knees position on the floor. Seeing the amount of paint rolling down the boss' arm has inspired me to put tape between the molding and the slick parquet floor. Why didn't she have us do that before we began to paint?

"I love your descriptions, Mari," Delia says. "It's hard to feel anything when you're surrounded by cement. God, but it's hard to paint ceilings." She twists about nervously. "Actually, talking about loving one's land seems as abstract to me as talking about life insurance policies." She stops moving a second to wipe sweat from her forehead, smearing paint on her skin. "Jesus!" she bursts out. "I've got more paint on me than Tom Sawyer had on his fence. Everybody better be careful. I forgot to have us tape the drop sheet flush to the floor molding. I must be losing it. Oh, Judith, so that's what you're doing? Good girl. Would you mind going all around the room and doing that?"

"Not at all," I say.

"I know what Mari feels and it's not romanticism," Ginny says.

Ginny impresses me. She has already taped up her area. I don't see one spot of stray paint near her. Everything about her says 'neatness.' Her short black hair looks like a skull cap. "It's

dedication," she adds. "I've never left my country. If I ran away from all that bothered me in America, I'd always be running." She punctuates her comment with an exuberant swoop of the roller, finishing up a large portion of the end wall.

"Ginny, you sound a little like me," I say. "I haven't even traveled to Europe. It's like I have to stay here and keep making America beautiful. Ever since I worked with SDS in the mid 60s I've felt that. But I admire so much what Mari has done. She has gone on an essential journey."

I catch Delia giving me an approving look. "You sound as romantic as Mari," she says, "or at least as dedicated. We need you." She swings her roller into the pan, then wipes a white shape away with the fresh, orchid color.

We work in silence for a while, but I feel uneasy. There's a small black cloud swirling around Mari. Momentarily she whips away from the window towards us, paintbrush held tightly to her chest. "You women don't really understand what I mean when I speak about my love for Argentina. I left her to know her. My connection to the land is the same as the Indian peoples have here. I am made of the rivers, mountains. She is always visible under my finger nails." Her voice breaks. "Oh, why I can't to give the details. It's so frustration for me sometimes—the English."

The sudden change in Mari's mood affects the room like a strange, new odor. Only the sounds we make working can be heard. I know when she's upset she needs space. It is some moments before I realize Delia has approached her. She grabs her arm awkwardly. "It's okay, Mari," she says sweetly. "I think I do know what you're talking about. Look, why don't we have some lunch now. We should get away from the paint smell. Right, Ginny?

* * *

I remember what a welcome relief lunch-break was for all of us that day. We sat down with sliced turkey sandwiches, cold fruit drinks and fresh vegetable sticks which Delia had brought. The tension was as thick as the mayonaise on Delia's sandwich as I got a chance to look more closely at our new acquaintances.

Both Delia and Ginny looked very tired. Had their work done it to them or something else?

Delia initiated the talk. "I come from a family of farmers on my mom's side. There's Arapaho blood there. My father is a blue-blood. That's funny! Blue bloods and red skins. We're all color coded. I wonder does that make me purple-nerved?"

"Well, you're at least purple skin now," I said stroking her spotted arm.

"I don't knows what is blue bloods. What is?" Mari's moodiness had vanished.

"Blue bloods are the families of the English aristocracy who came over on the Mayflower and settled in North America. They are portrayed as the ones who started civilization here—as if this land hadn't been inhabited for centuries before by Native American Indians. So, my great-great-grandfather came over on the big ship. Is that right? I may have added an extra father or eliminated one, but you get the point."

"Yes, I got it. You were a blue baby because you were suffocated by all those fathers on top of you," I quipped.

"Very clever, Judith," Delia said.

Ginny spoke louder than usual. "Now I know why you want to be our boss, but at the same time you feel guilty about it, Delia."

"Why?" Delia scowled.

Ginny was angry. "Because just like oil and vinegar, sweetie, Arapahos and Puritans don't mix. The Puritan in you feels it's your right and duty to lord it over other people and the Indian in you rebels against the boss mentality and wants us all to work side by side as equals. One of you smokes a peace pipe and the other puffs on a briar. Your ambivalence makes you fuck up sometimes."

"Since when did I boss you, Ginny? That's not fair!"

"You keep a lot of the information to yourself!" Ginny's voice tightened. "Like what estimate you gave the guys whose house this is, Delia, and when are we supposed to have all the rooms painted."

I watched them in slight shock. They aren't even trying to be cool in front of us. Now I understood the tension between them

all morning.

"I'm supposed to call you up everyday," Ginny fumed, "to see if there's work? No way, Jose. I need to plan my schedule. I've got a kid to support. My life can't depend upon whether you feel like working or not. I think you should explain each job situation to us and let us make a schedule together. Even if you don't want to work more, others of us do." She wriggled back to an unpainted part of a wall and slumped against it.

"I had no idea you were that angry at me. Am I supposed to read your mind? Why didn't you say something before?" Delia's voice shook.

"It's not a case of mind-reading, Delia. It's a case of consideration for your sisters."

Delia's face burned. "Fuck consideration of my sisters. I've been considering my sisters for years and what have they done for me? How have they treated me? Like shit. Who do you think put up the money to start the Tea House? And I told the collective it was only a short loan. Do you know Irene Kranitz? She was in charge of finances and she promised to get the money back to me."

"Oh, I know Irene," I said. "She's friends with Grace Cooper and Val Cranston. I know them all well from the...."

"Well, if you see Irene, Judith, remind her that I'm still here waiting for my money! I told the collective I could loan them money for only a year, the money I had saved up so that I could travel to Greece. They promised they would pay me back within six months. It's been three years and I haven't seen a bloody cent."

"That's terrible, Delia," Mari said. "The womins need so much to keep the trust between them."

"Between us," Ginny said.

"If it's being a Puritan to want what belongs to me, great, then I'm a fucking Puritan. And as for the running of this crew, who gets our gigs? Who runs all over the five boroughs finding work for us? I do. And I'm not taking any extra pay for the extra work I do. If you want to get down to the nitty-gritty, sweetie, I'm being taken!"

"Okay, Delia." Ginny said cautiously. "This just proves my point. We need to talk business. I'm dissatisfied with certain things and you are too. Let's get it out in the open. Maybe Judith and Mari have some ideas. I agree with you. I think you should get paid for the extra work you do. Write it into the expenses. But I need to know more about the specifics of each job and be able to expect a certain number of hours of work each week. Otherwise, it feels real flakey. I need some security in my life."

"Just a minute. I'll get out my peace pipe so I can talk to you." Delia still looked ready to throw a punch.

"Could you two pull in your horns for a second?" I stretched my shoulders in a circling motion, trying to get rid of the tension in them. "If you don't, I'm going to start throwing paint on the wall. Look, Mari and I are new with this. You shouldn't show us all your dirty laundry right away. "

Ginny threw me a sour look." You're pretty outspoken for a new worker. We don't need mediators."

"What's wrong with everybody? What happened?" Delia looked suddenly like a traffic cop. Her arms flailed in all directions. "One minute we're getting along fine, and then the next some bad energy came into the house. Mari will think we're bitches. Don't throw your frustration at me, Ginny. You can call me up any time and talk to me privately. Did you get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?"

"I fell out of bed and cracked my funnybone so I can't see the humor in anything," Ginny mocked. She fell silent.

Mari crunched noisily on a carrot. Then Ginny tried to make a joke about 'how many women libbers did it take to do spring house cleaning? Not waiting for a response she gave one; 'None. By the time they decide how it should be done it's already summer.'

"That puts down women, Ginny," I said. "I thought you were going to say, 'None, because women libbers always keep their houses clean.'"

"I thought you were going to say, 'None, because women libbers are too poor to have houses,'" Delia said.

"I hope that's not all the women libbers here think about in

the spring is to clean houses. They should be out with the bees and the flowers making love together," Mari said breaking the heaviness. "Delia, tell to me about your red, white and blue fathers."

"My white father started his own company—the one that takes baby pictures in hospitals. Everyone wants a picture of their newborn child. He was able to get sole rights to do this in hospitals all over the country. So to make a long story short, he is a millionaire."

I whistled in disbelief. "And you're painting houses, Delia, when you could be living in the lap of luxury?"

She looked at me pointedly. "That's a naive remark. I'm not a child. I have to make my own way, you know."

"What I mean is they probably send you money whenever you need it, right?" I asked sheepishly.

"No, they don't, dear," she answered reproachfully. "I've been disinherited by my father because I'm not going to give him a grandson to take on his great name, his business."

"He sounds like a pig," Ginny said.

"Pigs I can take. My father is cruel," Delia said. After a heavy moment she continued. "My mother's mother's name was Swift Hawk."

"Really, Delia," I cut in excitedly. "I've been having strange dreams lately where I'm taking part in a ritual. A psychic healer told me last year that she saw Mohawk blood in my past. She said it came through my father's side. His mother was born near Montreal in an area settled by the Mohawk Nation. I haven't talked about it with my father yet. Somehow I already know he'll deny the possibility. All they want to claim is their European roots. We have no official family tree written up to prove it. But I know it's true. Sorry for interrupting, Deal."

"More of us have Native American blood in us than we're told," Delia said. "Anyway, Swift Hawk died an alcoholic on the reservation in Colorado when my mother was three. And some Mormons in Salt Lake City adopted her."

"That's a sad story," I said. "It reminds me of something—Oh, I remember now. Did anyone read the article in the *New*

York Times about the Hopis stopping their rituals?" Nobody responded. "The article said that the Hopis announced they weren't going to do their rituals to keep the earth in rotation any more as a direct rebellion against the government for interfering with their land rights."

"My God, it's come to that," Ginny muttered.

"Ever since I read that, I've been haunted by another image that comes when I'm about to fall asleep. I see a young Indian woman plunge into a deep hole. She falls very slowly and begins to moan. Suddenly, she stops herself. I don't know how, but she perches herself against the earth wall. What do you think that means?"

"I think," Delia said, "it means that the Mohawk in you is also rebelling against the destructive forces at work in the universe. This Mohawk is not going to continue her ancient ritual of falling to the center of the earth. You could call it active resistance." She winked at me then added, "Look, maybe it means you should see a therapist. I don't know what it means. Just let me finish my story, will you? Where was I? Oh, yes, I remember. Mother was educated to be a teacher. After a year of teaching she met and married my dad. He wouldn't let her work after that, assuming she was going to have bushels of kids. But when she gave birth to me," her voice caught a second, "her uterus erupted. It just split apart for some reason; they gave her a complete hysterectomy without asking for her permission."

"Butchers," I said.

"My father makes fun of her all the time, calls her a peasant. He wants a socialite, a showpiece now. She has dark hair so he tells his business associates she's Spanish. At parties she sits quiet, passive, while he tells stories. It all makes me sick. So that's why I stay away."

"That's tough stuff, Delia," Ginny said almost tenderly. "Mari, I still don't get why you left Argentina. Isn't that something only rich people and the intelligensia can do?"

Mari's eyes lit up. "I *am* part of the intelligensia of my country. I left because I need to know who I am so that I can speak real in my land. I'm Italian, Jewish and Indian. You don't speak

clearly if you don't to know all your roots. When I go back I want to recreate the myths to inspire us again to new creative hope. It's a so dark reality in my country now with the military regime."

"What is happening there, Mari?" Delia asked.

"I'll know better when I get back. The papers are covering up the true facts. I am afraid for all my friends there."

"You just came back from Europe, right?" Ginny's voice softened.

"Yes, I was there for four months. Many writer friends from Argentina are in exile in France and Spain. I can't to see how they could stay so long time away from her, her struggle. It seem like some kind of terrible betrayal to me of our land. And I wanted to make touch with the Spanish journals I am familiar. If my works can't to be publish in Argentina then maybe here or maybe in the Spanish presses."

Here was my opportunity to get some support from the others to encourage Mari to stay. Reports had been appearing in the newspaper everyday about leftists, like herself, missing suddenly.

Maybe Mari would talk more about her situation with Delia and Ginny, after she got to know them better—tell others how afraid she is about what could happen to her when she does go back.

* * *

I feel worn out from worrying about her.

"What's the matter, Jude," Delia says. "The work getting to you—or maybe the paint fumes? You look really tired out. Maybe we should get back to work before we get too relaxed."

We gather up our lunch papers and stretch ourselves. I am just about to head for the bathroom in the hall when a tall man in a light tan suit enters the room.

"Taking a break, girls?" His tone is sarcastic and wooden. Both hands remain hidden in pants pockets. He tenses his lips stiffly, moving them together and apart nervously. His eyes, large and hurt looking, draw me.

All of us, like one body with multi-heads, come to attention.

"As a matter of fact we're just finishing lunch, Phil." Delia responds with some kind of aggression in her voice.

"Well, that's good because I'm paying you each five bucks an hour to do this work?" He shoots over to Mari's window and eyes it disapprovingly. "You're putting the paint on too thin. You've got to cover the white in one coat. Have you been checking the work, Delia?" Then he swings back to Delia. "I told you that, when I hired you. The whole house has to be painted in the three week period. This is only the first floor. I'm not paying over the estimate!"

"But it doesn't to want to cover completely," Mari says.

"Shh! Let Delia handle it, Mari," I mutter.

"It's not good enough, girls," the man states flatly, after a close scrutiny of Ginny's wall as well. He struts to the doorway and swirls around. "This floor should be done by tomorrow morning if you're going to be on schedule. You've got to do better. I'll be back tomorrow to check again." Then he charges out before any one of us can speak. Ginny gives him the finger.

"What a creep," she whispers. "I don't need this job badly enough to be insulted like that."

"Shh, Ginny, he can still to hear you." Mari grimaces. "I can't afford to not do this work. You can get other work. I'm illegal. They will put me in jail if they find out my visa is due over. I can't to repair the situation if they discover me."

"Don't worry, Mari," Delia says. "Unfortunately, he didn't hear Ginny. I wouldn't jeopardize your job." A tender look passes between them.

"Who was that rude person?" I ask.

A loud bang downstairs informs us he had left. We relax.

"Only the owner." Delia groans and moves her ladder to an unpainted corner of the room. "His name is Philip Owens. He and his boyfriend own this house. They make a business out of buying old houses, like this one. Then they fix them up—I mean then they pay other people minimally to fix them up—so they can sell them for twice what they paid. Your average clever businessmen."

"You mean he's gay? And he treats *us* like that! And he's not

even going to live here?" I say.

"There you go being naive again, Judith." Delia snorts outright. "They are in this purely for money. Gay people can be enterprising too, you know."

"And jerks," I say. "I hope you aren't defending the guy. That was arrogant behaviour. Oppressed people ought to be supportive of one another. I don't think that's naive. I think that's political. It's true, I can't get rid of an ideal image I have about gays and lesbians being different from other people in a special way. I guess because we've had to deny our reality so often and survive anyway."

"Maybe he doesn't consider himelf oppressed, sweetie. After all he is rich," Ginny says, stretching her arms up palms flat, as if to push away the unpleasant incident. "Here we are, poor church mice helping that mother fucker get richer, besides getting sick from paint fumes."

Delia nods. "You're right. Jesus, what am I doing to my poor throat, my operatic voice?" She warbles up and down a scale and ends with a terrible hacking cough. "But don't use that expression, Ginny," she croaks. "It really denigrates mothers."

"He's fucking me over and I'm a mother," Ginny growls. "What should I call him?"

"A prick. A capitalist banana." Delia responds.

"Hey," I break in, "don't put down bananas. Let's just ignore him. We'll do the best we can. What else can we do. Just don't take anymore work from him and tell all the other painters you know that this guy is a cheapskate. Be political about it. He knows we're doing a good job. He's got to find fault with us to justify the fact, or to hide the fact that we're only being paid five dollars an hour. Union painters get at least fifteen bucks. Just be thankful we don't have to do this all of our lives. I think I would kill myself if I had to do this all my life even for twelve dollars an hour."

"Thank God I have some nice gay friends," Ginny says. "Otherwise I'd really believe all men are pricks."

"Well, obviously there are women pricks too," I say.

"Yah, like Irene Kranitz," Delia says.

"It isn't Irene's fault that you haven't gotten your money back. It's the whole collective's," I say.

"Well, five dollar all hour seem like so good a deal for me," Mari says. "I want to keep this job. I'll put more of the paints on for five dollar all hour. Compare to what my people have to do to survival that's noting. They bend down and shine capitalists' boots clean just to git a little bread. Not the top of boot, but bottoms. We eat the scraps the Norte Americanos businessmans feed to their little poodles, the ones the poodles snub their noses at. The childrens in my country eat the sugar the imperialists don't put in their coffee. They go into the restaurants to steal the sugar cakes. They live on the sugar and use the papers for toilet wipes. That's how my people have to do to survive. I'll put more paints on him window if that's what he wants. In fact, I'll paint him window glass and I'll paint him little prick bright red for five dollars an hour and I'll fill his little asshole full of paint."

We all burst out laughing with Mari. Her message gets through: we still have the luxury of choice which she doesn't have.

We don't talk as much the rest of the afternoon, feeling pressured to get as much of the room painted as possible. Mari finishes six windows which pleases Delia. Mari points out to us that the games we played when we were growing up were deeply rooted in the class values we had come from. Delia and I had played bridge, Ginny bingo. One game honors intelligence, the other luck.

When we say goodbye at the end of the day after cleaning up the brushes and rollers, Mari tells Ginny and Delia, "I kiss you," with the kind of gentleness ordinarily shown to old friends. In Mari's mind they are old friends. She has just shared eight hours with them. She says she will never forget their faces.

Ginny and Delia even give one another a hug with a promise to call each other that night. They will iron things out between them so we won't have to hear their problems during the rest of the time we will all be working together to finish the job.

* * *

Just before Mari leaves for Argentina in December, we become lovers again. Our bodies need a great deal of comforting. Mari shows me how to release tension from her neck and shoulders. Our previous intense passion takes on a kinder aspect. We cannot talk about the future; it is too painful to confront. I write a song to her then. Even now when I sing the words I cry. I want to rock Mari with this song:

Footsteps sounding in my brain,
Footsteps, I hear them again and again,
When I go to sleep at night
And I'm resting from the day,
Footsteps take me away,
Take me away.

I see a wall of falling water,
A sky so blue
And there's a river flowing through me;
Take me to the one who is leaving.

Take me where her chariot goes riding.
The horse, the cloud, the serpent wave goodbye.
I can hear the sounds of her body.
You can too, for
It's real to love a woman,
Yes, it's real.

Take me where her doe waits kneeling in the meadow.
The stars are falling in her eyes.
I can see her walking in the forest,
Oh, it's real to love a woman,
Yes, it's real.

Take me to the crossing bridge
And join me with another.
It's real to love a woman.
Yes, it's real to love a woman.
I have dared to love a woman
And it's real.

I go alone with Mari to the airport. I want to feel the full impact of her departure without the comfort or distraction of another person. However, there are too many errands to complete to have time to acknowledge the gravity of the event as it is happening.

Later, when I remember us in the airport together, when I can see how the seconds ticked by like a time bomb as I hung odd parcels of books, clothes, tiny objects she'd collected in her years of travel under her cloak so she could pass through customs without having to pay a considerable sum of money, then I remember the look she gave me. It was similar to the look my mother had once hurled at me when she was being wheeled away to face a serious operation—a frightened, imploring look which asked me to save her from what lay ahead. She looked at me as if I were life and she were going towards death.

In only a matter of hours Mari would be entering a country tortured by the Junta. Violent, unaccountable deaths of creative, political young people like herself have become an everyday occurence. But we both do what we have to do and she is gone.

I believe now it was that look imploring me for help, for an answer, for a connection that ignited the nature of my connection to her—some people might call it an obsession—in the next three years when I do not see her and only sporadically hear from her.

* * *

Buenos Aires, Domingo 10 de mayo

Querida Judith,

I'm working like a free-lancer, writing notes and doing translations, but I make almost nothing of money. I'm living at a poor hotel and this became so dangerous each day. So this week I and a friend found a very small house two hours from the downtown and we took it by a very cheap rent, eight dollars by month. The house have not electricity neither running water.

It is impossible for people like me to rent a house or apartment in Buenos Aires today. Thousands of people without a place where to live. Also thousand of people are going outside of my country these year, Argentinian and also Uruguayan and Chi-

leans people that came in the past looking for work are refused here. Specialists calcule that most of three millions of Argentinians will be outside by the end of the year. My country have only 25 millions of persons. People are going to Venezuela, Mexico and Spain especially, looking for job and liberal democracy because are the only countrys (also Costa Rica) with Spanish language and similar cultural traditions where you can still find it. But Venezuela close now the frontiers. Mexico is at the door of a coup the state, and, with the international economic crisis, there is not a place where really to go. So people are going to Canada and Australia if they can. Here, in many aspects we seem to come back to the politics of the conservative and reactionary of 1930.

This administration respond to the interest of the big landlords, some multinational corporations and, of course the directives from Washington. The worker people are without any kind of protection now. Unemployment is growing and the salarys became so low. Into the free trade politics, the government liberate the price and, only in two weeks there was a 47% of increase of cost of living. This happened in April and just in June the salary will increase a 15%. Inflation will not stop yet, and much people will be starving next spring. The guerrila is being erased. We heard police sirens and we see tanks and trucks full of soldiers all the day in the streets of the city. And still people talk about the possibility of a new military coup more fascist. Anyway, the fascist regime, with other characteristics began during the Peronist government. This will take long. The imperialist capitalism is losing Africa, and they are pressing into Latin America. Our life are going in this process and there is too much death in my generation. I grew through dictatorships and military coups. I have nothing to feel nostalgia from the liberal democracy, I really dont know it.

But from here will begin the real class struggle. Peronist populism is death. This dark time inaugurate a new era. And I will be here.

My friend, I cannot say nothing about social reality in my regular letters, for that I'm talking about all this in this letter. Garcia

will bring this letter to you in New York. He is a so good person traveling now to your country.

About my work. I can say I'm trying to remember. The present and the past. I talk about the collective memory. Some time I can't understand we are not together, drinking coffee and talking.

Tell me about your personal life, about the little things of life.

Mari